Journal of Dracula Studies

Volume 5 Article 4

2003

The Dragon The Raven and the Ring

Michael Vorsino

The Dragon The Raven and the Ring

Cover Page Footnote

A TSD member, Michael Vorsino is completing his Masters degree in History (with thesis on Vlad Dracula) at the University of Texas at Arlington. A single father, he has two daughters – Samantha and Priscilla.

The Dragon, the Raven and the Ring

Michael Vorsino

[A TSD member, Michael Vorsino is completing his Masters degree in History (with thesis on Vlad Dracula) at the University of Texas at Arlington. A single father, he has two daughters – Samantha and Priscilla.]

Southeastern Europe has long been one of the world's hotbeds of instability and strife. Owing in part to the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with the simultaneous decline of the Byzantine Empire, this region was used as a marching ground for numerous armies. In Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), the Count refers to this instability when he tells Jonathan Harker: "In the region through which you came last night, there can be but little doubt; for it was the ground fought over for centuries by the Wallachian, the Saxon, and the Turk. Why, there is hardly a foot of soil in all this region that has not been enriched by the blood of men, patriots, or invaders" (27).

In the early to mid-fifteenth century, as the Ottoman tide reached its apex, freedom from the suzerainty of Ottoman dominion was a dream shared by many regional leaders. Relationships and partnerships were forged between these leaders, most of which were not entirely successful, but few are more dynamic than the triangle that was formed between Vlad Dracul, his son Vlad Dracula (better known by Romanian historians as Vlad Ţepeş) and John Hunyadi.

Since the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, the countries in this part of Europe have been sandwiched between the dichotomous forces of the Christian west and the Muslim east. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were particularly difficult, as the expansion of the Ottoman tide swept across the continent. Striving to preserve the independence of their states, this region has not surprisingly produced some of the most incredible men of the time.

John Hunyadi was a celebrated war hero, made legendary by his confrontations with the Ottoman Turks. He was a man of immense power and wealth, often financing campaigns largely out of his personal funds. His ultimate desire was to see the Ottomans expelled from Europe forever. His political and military machinations reached into surrounding countries, including Wallachia, where he set up and deposed some of its leaders (based on their perceived loyalty to the Christian cause), including Vlad Dracul, and his son Vlad Ţepeş (henceforth in this essay referred to as Dracula). Dracula was driven by a passionate hatred of all that would disrupt Wallachian independence, especially the Turks. This enmity was fueled in part by a period of Turkish captivity during which he had endured tortures of several kinds, including frequent use of the lash by his Turkish tutors. When Vlad Dracula became voivode of Wallachia, he became widely known for his liberal use of impalement as a form of punishment, hence his nickname "the Impaler." This torturous method of execution was used with great effectiveness as a means of psychological warfare in his brutal battles with the forces of Mehmed "the Conqueror," who was one of the most powerful sultans of the Ottoman Empire. Because of his opposition to the Ottomans, Vlad Dracula is seen by many as the father of Romanian sovereignty.

An examination of the links between Vlad Dracula and John Hunyadi begins with the relationship Hunyadi had with Dracula's father, Vlad Dracul ("the Dragon"). In 1438, just two years after taking the Wallachian throne, Dracul aided Sultan Murad II in a raid on Transylvania (Treptow 44). Hunyadi, having

recently been appointed as "defender" of Transylvania, was unable to stop the Turks from plundering several cities. By 1440 the relations between Hungary and Wallachia began to improve, as politically Dracul began to stray from the Ottomans in favor of his Christian allies. Hunyadi, however, had not forgotten Dracul's aid to the Ottomans in 1438. Thus, when the Sultan had Dracul imprisoned in 1442, Hunyadi removed Dracul's oldest son, Mircea, and seated Basarab II on the Wallachian throne. This appointment did not last long. In March 1443, Sultan Murad II released Dracul after he agreed to send his two youngest sons, Vlad and Radu, to become "guests" (hostages) at Murad's court. "The Dragon" invaded and reclaimed his rightful place as ruler of Wallachia a few weeks later.

Meanwhile in Hungary, Hunyadi had become engrossed in preparations for what would be known as the Varna Campaign. Not wishing to weaken his border with Wallachia, Hunyadi chose to accept Dracul once again. On the eve of the Varna offensive, the two signed a treaty increasing trade between their respective nations. It is entirely possible that Hunyadi used the agreement as a means to compel Dracul to participate in the upcoming campaign. With much trepidation, Dracul agreed to send 4,000 troops to serve in Hunyadi's army under the command of his son, Mircea. Dracul was taking a great risk, given the precarious condition of his two sons being held hostage by the Sultan. Prior to the crusade, he wrote to the citizens of Braşov, pointing this out: "Please understand that I have allowed my little children to be butchered for the sake of Christian peace" (qtd in Florescu & McNally, *Dracula: Biography* 106).

The Varna Crusade ended in disaster. Fearing repercussions from the Ottomans, Dracul had Hunyadi arrested upon the latter's flight through Wallachia. Vlad blamed Hunyadi for the debacle. He must have felt anguish over thoughts of his children being slaughtered because of his decision to support the Transylvanian Voivode. News soon came that Murad had not ordered Dracul's progeny killed, but rather, preferred to use them as a bargaining chip to control Wallachia.

From 1445-1447, the enmity between Vlad Dracul and Hunyadi began to grow. Both men supported different candidates for the Moldavian throne, and neither had forgotten the other's transgression. Dracul was compelled to sign a treaty with the sultanate in light of his decrepit relations with Hunyadi. In July of 1447, Hunyadi appealed to the leaders of Braşov to support Vladislav II for the Wallachian throne. In November, he invaded Wallachia. Dracul was killed near Balteni in January of the following year, while his oldest son, Mircea, was buried alive by boyars loyal to Hunyadi.

Necessity makes strange bedfellows, or so it would seem when examining the association between "the Son of the Dragon" and the "White Knight" of Hungary. Like his father Dracul, Vlad Dracula felt the Wallachian throne was his by divine right. His opportunity came when he was released after four years of captivity following his father's murder in 1448. Hunyadi had chosen yet again to confront the Turks. He enlisted the newly appointed Vladislav II (Voivode of Wallachia) and along with other nobles, crossed the Danube on their way to Kosovo in 1448. Dracula seized the opportunity and invaded Wallachia, and, with the help of the Turks he briefly captured his coveted prize. The victory was short lived as after suffering defeat at Kosovo, Vladislav II reclaimed the throne and Dracula was compelled to flee to Moldavia. For the next several years (1448-1455), Dracula was forced to travel back and forth between Moldavia and Transylvania riding the tides of political change. Hunyadi would not offer him any help, and the turbulence surrounding the frequent change in Moldavian leadership required Dracula to maintain a low profile. In 1455, the situation was right for Dracula to re-emerge as claimant to his father's throne. He appealed to Hunyadi for asylum, and this time it was granted. The Transylvanian ruler went as far as introducing Dracula to King Ladislas, lauding him as the best man for the Wallachian crown (see Florescu & McNally, *Dracula: Biography* 40-44)

Hunyadi may have come to realize that Dracula was the man he had sought all along. They both shared a special hatred for the Turks and with Hunyadi's coming

preparations to defend Belgrade, he needed his Wallachian flank secure from Ottoman loyalists. Both men had witnessed first hand the cruelty of the Ottoman blade. Years of captivity sharpened Dracula's disdain and would lead him to commit legendary acts of barbarity, earning him respect, fear and fame throughout Europe. Shortly after his ascension to the Wallachian throne, in the early summer of 1456, Vlad Dracula took an oath of loyalty to King Ladislas. This let Hunyadi concentrate on the defense of Belgrade and relieved his anxiety concerning his Wallachian border (Stoicescu 82)

Only three months after Hunyadi's death, which occurred after he led the valiant defense of Belgrade, Ladislas V wanted Dracula removed. The events that followed bring to light another aspect of the relationship between Hunyadi and Dracula: their mutual kinship with Michael Szilagyi. Szilagyi was cut from the same mold as Hunyadi and Dracula. A fierce warrior and ardent enemy of the Turks, Szilagyi was also was Hunyadi's brother-in-law and a trusted friend and confidant to both men. (He may well have been the father of Vlad Dracula's second wife. See Florescu & McNally, *Dracula: Prince* 166.) In a bold move, Szilagyi rallied the supporters of the Hunyadi family (following John's death) against the Hungarian nobility, which was led by two former friends of Hunyadi, Palatine Garai and Nicholas Uljaki. This put Szilagyi in direct confrontation with the Hungarian King, Ladislas V. Szilagyi drew first blood when he had his own nephew, Ladislas of Hunedoara, killed. Ladislas had taken the title of "Warlord of Transylvania" after John Hunyadi's death, and opposed his uncle's attempts to consolidate Hunyadi's power (Stoicescu 85). One of the German pamphlets (Nürnberg 1488) claims that Dracula may have aided his friend in this matter: "In the same year he was appointed lord in Wallachia. Immediately he had Prince Lasla killed, who was lord of this country. Soon after this he had villages in Transylvania, also a town by the name of Beckendorf in Wurtzland, burned."

Some have interpreted this to indicate the slaying of the previous Wallachian ruler, Vladislav II. However, it could also be in reference to Szilagyi and Dracula's open war against their mutual enemies, the Uljaki and Garai families, as well as the merchants of Braşov, who were forced endure Vlad's wrath after agreeing to harbor a pretender to his throne, Dan III. The burning of towns in Transylvania refers to the events of April and May 1457, when Dracula invaded Transylvania and burned the villages of Casolt, Hosman, Satulnoe, and Berkendorf (Stoicescu 84-85). By September of 1457, both sides had agreed to an armistice. In December, Vlad Dracula spoke to the burghers of Brasov: "May your highness learn that everything that my elder brother and master Mihail Szilagyi ordered me I will observe" (qtd in Stoicescu 86).

There can be little doubt that Hunyadi, Dracul, and Dracula shared the same goal: the end of Turkish oppression that was to blanket the area for centuries. Both Dracul and Hunyadi spent considerable time in, and showed loyalty to, the Court of King Sigismund I. Sigismund was patron to both men. He trusted them, and he made it possible for Hunyadi and Dracul (and thus, Dracula) to assume the vital role of leadership in a war-torn area. So why then did their relationship end so poorly? To understand this, one must understand the driving force behind each man.

Vlad Dracul sought to maintain Wallachian independence at any cost. After the passing of Sigismund I, Dracul went the way of many of Sigismund's followers. That is, their loyalty was extended to the man, not the crown. Realizing that he would never receive the support from the new King of Hungary that he had from his patron, Vlad sought peace with his enemies in order to save his people from the brutal wrath of the

Turks. Subsequent peace treaties and the homage he paid to the sultan put him at odds with the oath he swore to Sigismund as a member of the Order of the Dragon: to fight the enemies of Christ, whether they be Hussite or Turk.

John Hunyadi was, in many ways, an idealist. He never swayed from his dream of ending Ottoman suzerainty. Hunyadi always held a feeling of contempt for those who would placate the Turks rather than fight. Frustrated time and time again by western powers, Hungarian division, and the cowardice of the regional nobility, Hunyadi fought on against overwhelming odds in the vain hope that Christendom would rise up and unite to smite the Turkish "infidel."

Both Hunyadi and Dracul influenced Vlad Dracula. As the son of Dracul, he carried on and surpassed his father's vow to fight the Turks. He shared his father's desire for Wallachian independence, and took inhumane measures to make it a reality. Even when one considers that the tales of the Impaler Prince are certainly exaggerated, the fact remains that they are based to a great extent on actual events. From a military standpoint, Dracula was surely inspired by the tales of triumph and sacrifice made by Hunyadi. He even went as far as imitating Hunyadi in his famous "night attack" on Mehmed's camp. His own efforts to resist the Turkish menace have inspired a nation, and, for better or worse, his name lives on because an Irish writer chose his sobriquet "Dracula" for the title character of his classic horror novel.

Works Cited:

"Dracula." Nürnberg, 1488. Translated with an Essay by Beverley Eddy. Philadelphia: Rosenbach Museum & Library, 1985.
Florescu, Radu and Raymond McNally. *Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler.* New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973
Florescu, Radu and Raymond McNally. *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1989.
Stoicescu, Nicolae. "Vlad Tepes' Relations with Transylvania and Hungary." In Kurt W Treptow, ed, *Dracula: Essays on the Life and Times of Vlad Ţepeş.* East European Monographs. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 81-101.
Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897. New York: Norton, 1997.